

James Brebner (1859-1932), U of Toronto Registrar

brebner.com

Brebner, James, educationist. Son of late **James Brebner**, Inspector of Schools, Co. Lambton, Ontario and **Margaret (Elliot) Brebner**; born London, Ontario, Sept. 22, 1859; educated at Sarnia High School, Brantford College Institute and Toronto University (B.A., 1891); married Miss **Frances E. Bartlet**, Windsor, Ontario; some years a public and high school teacher; has been for some time registrar Toronto University, a position he still fills; declined bursarship to McGill university, 1902; a contributor to *Westminster*; res. 57 Howland Avenue, Toronto.

[*The Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, ed Henry J. Morgan, Toronto, 1912]

Sketch Biography of James Brebner 1859-1932

Written by Dr. Charles Levi, Toronto.

James Brebner was born in 1859, the son of a Sarnia school inspector. He attended public school in Sarnia in the 1870s, and then went to work in order to raise the funds to pay tuition at Brantford Collegiate Institute. He graduated from Brantford C.I. in 1883, and yet again was forced to work to raise money for his University education. He taught English, history, and classics at Petrolia High School and with this money, as well as money he earned as a student assistant at the University Library, he was able to pay his way through to his graduation in 1891.

During his University career, and while he was still employed at the Library, a disastrous fire broke out at University College on February 14, 1890. The fire completely destroyed the University's library. **Brebner** was able to save 100 volumes from the flames, a sizable number of the 729 books which survived the fire. 32,000 other books were not so lucky.

In the aftermath of the fire, **Brebner** was credited by many to have been "responsible for the rapid reconstruction of the valuable collection of books." **Brebner** also refined the cataloguing system for the library, and his system, unique to Toronto, persisted until the Library converted to the Library of Congress system in 1959. **Brebner's** "old class" system has still to this day not been completely converted over to the Library of Congress system.

Some assumed that **Brebner** would receive the job of librarian after his work in the early 1890s, but the job was instead given to **Hugh H. Langton**, previously the Registrar of the University. **Langton's** appointment left a vacancy at Registrar, and the position was offered to **James Brebner**, who served as acting Registrar in 1892 and then was appointed to the full position in 1893.

Early on in his career, during the traditional student unrest which accompanied fall convocation at the University, **Brebner** had the misfortune to be knocked to the ground three times by a senior student while attempting to restore order. In 1894 this student was known only as **Mackenzie King**. Twenty-nine years later, a surprised **Brebner** would find himself conferring an honorary degree on this same person, now Prime Minister of Canada.

Student unrest aside, **Brebner** was well-liked by the student body. In 1902, a rumour was spread that he had been offered the position of bursar at McGill University, and a spontaneous student rally demanded that he be retained at Toronto. The University duly raised his salary and he stayed. In later years, some would say the 1902 offer never existed, and was concocted by **Brebner** to maintain his position. Nonetheless, the student rally was real and **Brebner** was also honored by being elected honorary President of the *University College Literary and Scientific Society*, the primary student Society, for the 1902/03 academic year.

Brebner's challenge throughout his time as Registrar was to bring order to a system which was complicated by the federated structure of the University. Composed of several constituent colleges, all of which had their own traditions, the University could not be easily standardized. **Brebner** did his best, and was helped immeasurably by a new University act, passed in 1906, which clarified and centralized certain powers in the University. The act almost cost him his job, when the President of the University at the time, **James Loudon**, insisted that his first action under the new act should be to fire **Brebner**, whom he considered to be incompetent and insubordinate. **Brebner** stayed, and **Loudon** resigned in disgust.

Brebner would continue as registrar for the next twenty-four years. When he was not in his office, he would occasionally be allowed a vacation. One of his more satisfying vacations was in 1920. As the Senate citation passed on his death stated, "When he had leave of absence in 1920 he visited Scotland and explored many a remote Liddesdale valley and glen which had been inhabited by his forefathers." **Brebner's** last decade in office was marked by personal tragedies. His wife, **Francis Elizabeth Bartlett**, died December 25, 1923 and his sister, **Margaret Helen Brebner [Mrs. L.S. Coxon]** died in Central India on July 22, 1927. Although these deaths weakened him, he continued in his position until his retirement, announced in 1929 effective June 30, 1930. On retirement, he was granted an LLD by the University of Toronto. Queen's University had similarly honored him in 1920. There was a move by certain Alumni to have **Brebner** appointed to the University's Board of Governors, but instead he accepted a position as vocational guidance supervisor for the Province of Ontario. He held this position for two years, during which time he would still visit the campus and engage in his passion for gardening. On May 5, 1932, while digging irises outside the Botany building on campus, he dropped dead in the afternoon. He was buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery. The Senate of the University of Toronto honored him with a citation on June 8, 1932. It declared that "probably no member of the University was known personally to so large a body of its graduates, and none was held in greater respect and affection than **Dr. Brebner**."

The author wishes to credit especially the following sources:

Robert H. Blackburn, "*Evolution of the Heart: A History of the University of Toronto Library up to 1981*", University of Toronto Press, 1989.

Martin Friedland, "*The University of Toronto: A History*", University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Keith Walden, "*Hazes, Hustles, Scraps and Stunts: Initiations at the University of Toronto 1880-1925*", in Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, "*Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education*", McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.

Also, extensive use was made of the University of Toronto Archives' clippings file on James Brebner, found in UTA/GraduateRecords/A73-0026/036(37)

Dr. Charles Levi, Toronto

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